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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the factors involved in deciding which variety of English to teach in areas of African where English is the language of education. Three main alternatives are recognized: American English, British English, or African English. Until recently, English was taught almost exclusively with British materials, and students were expected to approximate the British accent and to pass British examinations in English. Recent inroads have been made by American English, however, because of the availability of modern teaching and testing materials from American rather than British sources, because of the presence of American teachers in Africa, and because of increased opportunities for African students to pursue a higher education in the United States. Also recognized is African English, here identified as the variety spoken by an emerging elite of African politicians and statesmen "whose own command of English is both internationally intelligible and yet at the same time identifiably African," and the author discusses possibilities for preparing materials for teaching this variety once it has been described in modern linguistic and phonetic terms. The effects of choosing one variety over the other are considered in terms of the differences among them, as well as in terms of social and cultural consequences. (FWB)

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English in African education: what kind of English?

Peter Strevens.

The existing situation, in those countries of Africa which are conveniently designated as "Anglophone", is that English is used to a greater or lesser extent as the medium of education.(1) In the past the criticism was sometimes heard that the English as it was taught in schools in Africa whether deliberately or incidentally had or was intended to have the effect of teaching Africans to "speak like Englishmen". The situation is now more complex. In various parts of Africa decisions of policy are being taken which in these same rough terms can be said to lead to Africans speaking like Englishmen in some cases, like Americans in others, and like Africans in others. This paper is concerned to outline some of the parameters involved in these decisions.

How important is this matter? The British élite have traditionally been given to rather extreme pejorative value-judgments about varieties of English, particularly accents, other than their own. Throughout the colonial era the teaching of English in British-controlled areas of Africa embodied these assumptions: (a) that British English is superior to American English; (b) that the accent of educated Englishmen (educated, it would normally be assumed, at public school and Oxford or

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(1) For a summary of the aims and functions of English in education, see G.E.Perren's paper to this Conference.

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Cambridge) was superior to all other accents;[2] (c) that Africans should be taught to approach as nearly as possible to this British 'ideal', any shortfall being regarded as regrettable. Even if these views were still held in Britain (and they have very largely been overtaken by more liberal ideas) it is no longer possible to hold them in Africa. Yet many African teachers are disturbed by a feeling that any influences which tend towards an American or even towards a distinctively African form of English are undesirable. The importance of the whole question would seem to lie in (a) the way it conditions the rejection or acceptance by Africans of American assistance or materials in English teaching; (b) the extent to which African countries learn about Western technological civilization and culture through British and European contact or through American channels; and (c) the effect which accepting or rejecting a recognisably African variety of English might have upon feelings of local, regional and ethnic nationalism.

Since we are discussing English as it is used in education, the degrees of difference which can occur between one variety and another are limited. Leaving aside local dialects, pidgins, and other forms of English not regarded as suitable for teaching the young, the grammar of English (in the sense of the rules for constructing acceptable sentences, whether written or spoken) is

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(2) During this period the British people who worked in Africa were almost exclusively administrators, doctors, lawyers, teachers: upper-middle class and speakers of a uniform variety of English. Exceptions were Scots and Irishmen (especially among missionaries) who were accorded some degree of social tolerance. The great range of dialects and accents which the inhabitant of Britain takes for granted was unknown to the African colonial subject, who assumed that <u>all</u> British people except a few from the Northern Territories spoke Standard English, with an Educated Southern British accent.

virtually identical everywhere in the world. Even as between British and American varieties of English, which exhibit some of the more marked differences, grammatical variations are few in number and are of the order of:- Brit. Have you got a....., American. Do you have a..... Differences of vocabulary between one variety and another are more numerous but seem not to constitute more than a marginal source of difficulty in communication or in learning. The most important single linguistic point of difference between one variety of English and another lies in accent, in the system of phonetic features. Even here one can be fairly precise: consonants vary hardly at all from one accent to another (with rare exceptions such as the retroflex t and d of Indian English); vowels and diphthongs are generally nearly the same in number (being rarely more unlike than e.g. my own accent, RP, and Scots) but they can vary considerably in sound quality; stress and rhythm are rather invariate; intonation varies considerably, especially in the tunes which precede the main pitch-changes.(3) In other words, we identify an accent of English largely by vowel-quality and intonation pattern. The accompanying Table gives an approximate typology of accents of English.

The foregoing remarks relate to linguistic differences, but of course the learning of one variety rather than another carries with it the automatic assumption of membership of a particular society and participation in a particular culture. Thus the choice of a British or an American or an African variety of English for educational purposes has unavoidable consequences of preference for, or readiness to turn towards, or partial identification with, or even rejection of, one cultural outlook rather than another.

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(3) It is my impression that the number and direction of pitch-changes in the nuclei vary little, but that the pre-tonic "tunes" vary greatly and constitute a main characteristic of one accent as against another.

Three main alternatives are open, then, to those who organise the teaching of English in Anglophone Africa. The variety of English set up as the target for educational purposes may be a British variety, an American variety, or an African variety. In practice, however, the decision to select one rather than another is obscure and oblique. In most countries the great majority of teachers of English follow the procedures of earlier days when most of their predecessors were expatriates who spoke English as their mother tongue. They use course-books written in the British style and tradition of English language teaching, and they prepare for one or more of a set of British examinations in English.(4) In all these arrangements it is British English, generally with a near approximation to a British accent, that is supposed to be taught by the teacher and acquired by the African pupil.

But this British-oriented set of procedures is increasingly breached and the alternative models, that is,of American or African English, are being introduced. The American element arises in four main ways: (a) a small number of schools and colleges have embraced the use of modern aids in language teaching, especially the language laboratory, and have then found that almost the only teaching courses available are American; (b) some schools and

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(4) It is worth commenting that the conventional School Certificate or G.C.E. English Language examinations, and similar examinations such as the Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English, are increasingly the object of criticism by teachers and educational authorities. The objections made to them are that they are poor in validity and reliability as devices for the assessment of performance; that they incorporate a non-authentic and stilted form of English; and above all that they perpetuate styles of teaching which are educationally undesirable. The West African Examinations Council has taken the lead in reforming its English language examinations, but all too frequently African pupils are being prepared for unsuitable examinations in English, and preparation for these examinations takes the place of learning to use English in an effective way.

teachers have become so opposed to conventional British examinations in English language that they have changed to the use of American tests such as those offered by the University of Michigan or Educational Testing Services of Princeton, New Jersey; (c) in many areas, young Americans, members of the Peace Corps, have been used as teachers and auxiliaries, thus providing an authentic and attractive model of American English; (d) scholarships and grants for further education are increasingly available in the United States, where most universities do not share the unwillingness of British universities to provide for foreign students opportunities for intensive remedial work on their own English, and where academic entry standards are often lower.

Nobody as yet actually teaches an African variety of English, although the project has been discussed often enough among teachers and teacher trainers.(5) The element of African English arises in other ways: through the emergence of an élite of African politicians and statesmen whose own command of English is both internationally intelligible and yet at the same time identifiably African; through the departure of many of the expatriate teachers who formerly provided high standards not just in teaching English but also in their use of English while teaching other subjects;(6) through the dilution in the standard

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(5) When I was engaged, with Mrs.C.McCallien, in producing a series of text-books for teaching English pronunciation in primary and middle schools in Africa, we made a study of this problem. We simplified the description of English in a small number of ways consistent with educated West African usage and incorporated these simplifications into the course. (ENGLISH SPEECH, McCallien and Strevens, Longmans Green & Co.). But we were hampered by the lack of descriptive studies of pronunciations of English that could be called "educated African".

(6) For further comment on this vital but neglected factor, see G.E.Perren's paper to this Conference; also P.Strevens, The teaching of other subjects in a foreign language, in C.Kreidler (Editor),"On Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages", Series II, Champaign, Ill., 1966.

of teachers, especially in the matter of their command of English, as a result of the explosive increase in the number of schools since independence; and not least through the practical operation of the pragmatic advice of many British teachers of English, which was to aim at British English, but not to expect perfection.(7)

Before very long it is likely that the common features of African English - or at least of a West African or East African or Central African variety - will have been authoritatively described in modern linguistic and phonetic terms. Once this has been done it is a relatively small step in principle (though a very large one in practice) to the construction of specialised course materials for teaching English in which it is African English that forms the implicit and explicit target.(8)

Eventually, no doubt, it will be taken for granted that Africans using English in national and international communication will do so in ways that are as identifiably African as Australians or Americans are identifiably Australian or American: and it will be accepted that they speak in this way. In the meantime we are

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(7) This willingness on the part of British teachers of English to accept less than perfection and to expect, even to welcome, the emergence of a new variety of English, is not shared by many American authorities. Perhaps the smaller number of American-derived varieties compared with those derived from British English causes this difference of outlook. But what Prof. Clifford Prator has called "the British Heresy" seems to most British educators only a necessary acceptance of the inevitable. British and American thought agrees, however, in insisting that adequate intelligibility must always be sought, whatever vowel-qualities the pupils may turn out to use.

(8) This is not necessarily an advantage, pedagogically speaking: a first-class teaching course of a "generalised" kind (i.e. using and teaching English as it is spoken and written in Britain or America, making no concessions to what the learner's mother tongue might be) is probably better than a poor "specialised" course. But there are potential advantages in specialised materials, and competent courses setting out to teach an African English are to be welcomed.

in a transitional period when some Africans speak like Englishmen, a few speak it like Americans, and the many who speak identifiably like Africans do so because of the failure of English teaching, not because of its success.

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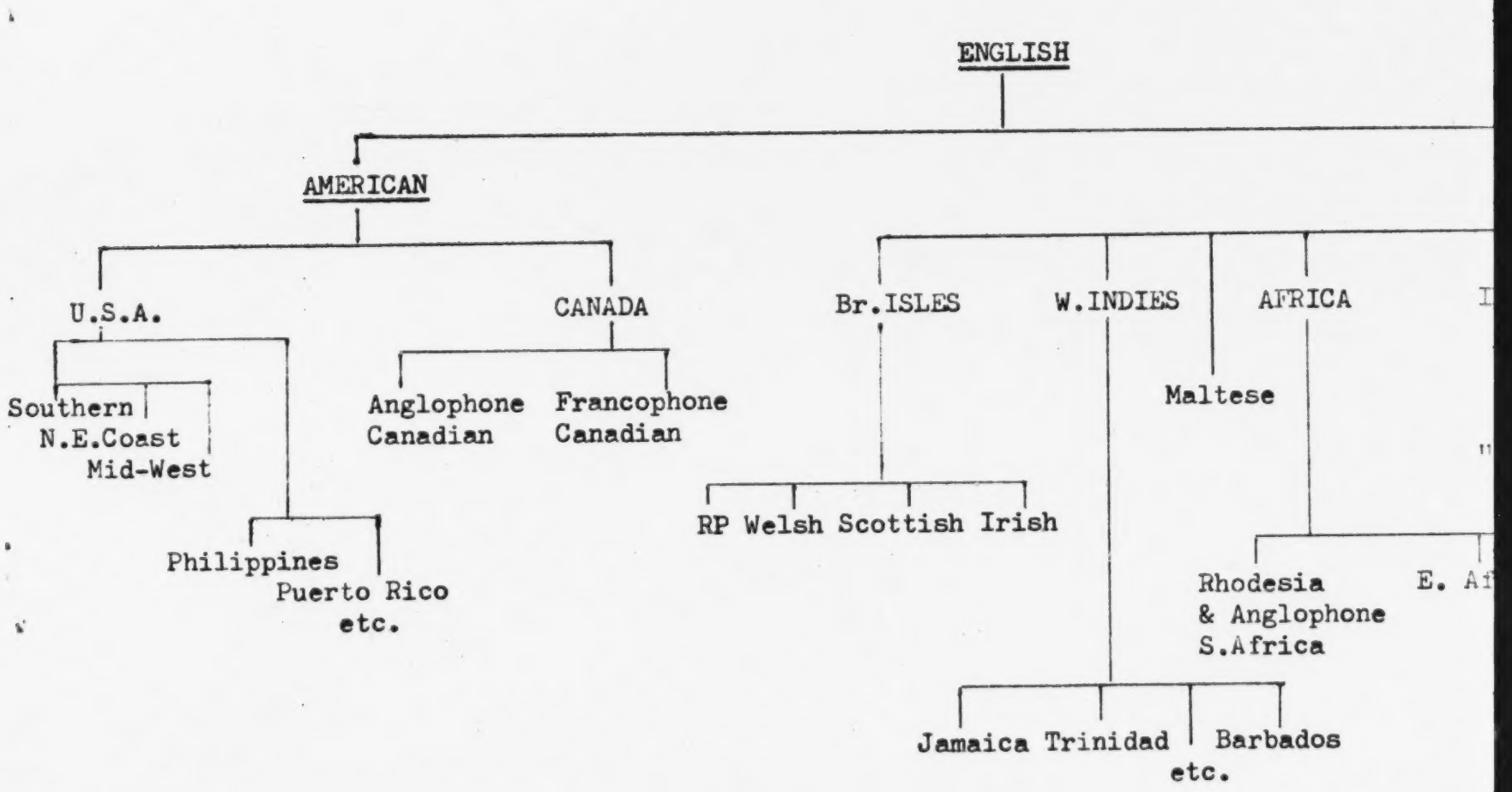

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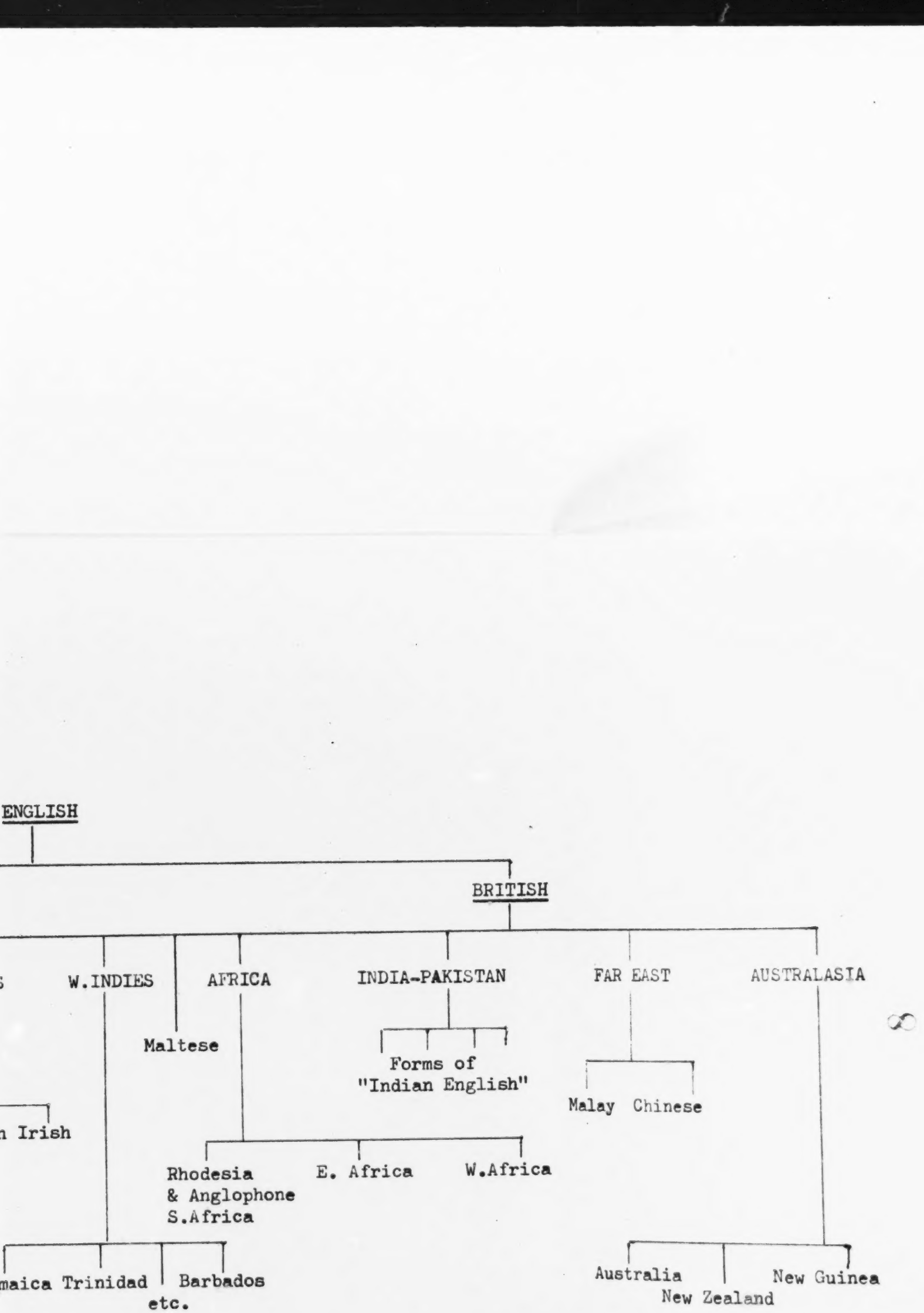

Table: An approximate taxonomy of accents of English.